

DIVERSITY NEWS

June 2008

Yvonne: As defined by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the GAO, diversity management is a process intended to create and maintain a positive work environment—an environment in which the similarities and differences of individual employees are valued—so that ALL employees can reach their potential and maximize their contributions to their organization's strategic goals and objectives.

Thomas: But how do you DO that?

How do you create a work environment in which ALL employees can contribute, to the maximum extent possible, to the success of their organization?

Yvonne: As pointed out by the GAO, a high-performance organization relies on a dynamic workforce with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to ensure the accomplishment of its mission.

Such an organization typically fosters a work environment in which people are enabled and motivated to contribute to the accomplishment of the organization's mission.

Thomas: Typically, a high-performance organization also provides both accountability and fairness for all employees.

To accomplish these objectives, high-performance organizations are inclusive, drawing on the strengths of employees at all levels and of all backgrounds.

Yvonne: In this edition of Diversity News, we'll take a closer look at what the GAO had to say in its report on diversity management.

In 2004, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs asked the GAO to report on the federal government's performance in managing its diverse workforce.

For that report, the GAO's objectives were to identify leading diversity management practices, and to identify examples of how federal agencies implement those practices.

To identify leading diversity management practices, the GAO reviewed diversity management literature and met with federal officials and experts in the field of diversity management.

The GAO identified as "leading" those diversity management practices that a majority of experts cited as leading practices, best practices, or components of a successful diversity initiative.

To identify agency examples of leading practices in the federal government, the GAO reviewed diversity management literature and met with officials from the National Academy of Public Administration, and others.

In January 2005, the GAO published its report, “Diversity Management...Expert-Identified Leading Practices and Agency Examples.”

In that report, the GAO identified nine leading practices of diversity management: commitment to diversity, as demonstrated and communicated by the organization's top leadership; the inclusion of diversity management in the organization's strategic plan; diversity linked to performance; measurement of the impact of various aspects of a diversity program; management accountability for the progress of diversity initiatives; succession planning; recruitment; employee involvement; and diversity training.

Thomas: As the GAO points out in its report, the single most important element of ANY successful management initiative is the demonstrated commitment of top leaders.

That's just as true for diversity management as it is for any other management initiative.

Within organizations, leaders and managers are primarily responsible for the success of diversity management, because they must provide visibility and commit the necessary time and resources.

A leader committed to diversity management communicates the organization's support for diversity—in newsletters, policy statements, speeches, meetings, on Web sites, and through formal and informal mentoring programs.

Communication of this commitment from senior management throughout the organization sends a clear message to others in the organization about the seriousness—and business relevance—of diversity management.

As an example of leadership commitment, the GAO report describes activities of Dr. Elias Zerhouni, director of the National Institutes of Health.

Since being named director in 2002, Dr. Zerhouni has increased efforts to recruit minority staff members, supported educational scholarship programs at learning institutions with historically diverse student bodies, and increased the agency's commitment to better understand and communicate about racial disparities in health care.

In 2003, Dr. Zerhouni received a CEO Leadership Award from Diversity Best Practices, which recognizes ground-breaking diversity commitment of CEOs and their respective companies.

Yvonne: Successful change management initiatives in large public and private sector organizations can take five to seven years (or more) to complete.

For that reason, institutionalizing diversity initiatives by integrating them into strategic planning efforts is very important.

As the GAO points out, integrating diversity management into an organization's strategic plan fosters a culture change that supports and values differences.

Linking diversity to the overall strategic plan also ensures that diversity initiatives will not be viewed as an "extra"—which could make them more vulnerable to funding cuts.

As an example of diversity being part of an organization's strategic plan, the GAO cites the Department of Veterans Affairs inclusion of diversity management as part of an "enabling goal" in its strategic plan.

The enabling goal is to "deliver world-class service to veterans and their families through effective communication and management of people, technology, business processes, and financial resources."

The first objective under this enabling goal is to "recruit, develop, and retain a competent, committed, and diverse workforce that provides high-quality service to veterans and their families."

Strategies and initiatives described under this strategic objective include: improved succession planning, diversity training, diversity recruitment, and conflict resolution.

Thomas: According to the GAO report, a more diverse and inclusive work environment can yield greater productivity and help improve individual and organizational performance.

For example, promoting diversity might help an organization expand services to meet the needs of a more diverse customer base.

Fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace could also help organizations reduce costs—by reducing turnover, increasing employee retention across demographic groups, and improving morale.

As an example of linking diversity to performance, the GAO report cites the U.S. Postal Service's Office of Diversity Development.

The Office of Diversity Development's strategic plan states that its policy is to value and manage the diversity of its employees, customers, and suppliers.

It also states that to reach out to diverse, multidimensional, and emerging markets, it must identify and understand the needs of customers and design and implement a comprehensive strategy that demonstrates value for all customer markets.

As an example of extending services to emerging markets, the Postal Service translated customer mailing guides and instructions for many post office documents into Chinese and Spanish.

Yvonne: Quantitative and qualitative measures of various aspects of a diversity program can help gauge the effectiveness of diversity management efforts.

Organizations can also track the return they receive on investments in such areas as diversity training and recruitment.

In addition to quantitative workforce data, organizations can use qualitative data... for example, from surveys or focus groups...to identify employee and customer perceptions.

Over time, trends in employee and customer responses can help organizations assess how their diversity initiatives are progressing.

The GAO report cites as exemplary the Department of Veterans Affairs for the ready availability of diversity statistics through the VHA Support Service Center Web site.

Anyone with access to the site can generate reports related to succession planning, workforce planning, workforce diversity, and employee survey results.

Thomas: Accountability is a key element for ensuring the success of diversity management efforts.

According to the GAO, organizations must provide a means for ensuring that managers at all levels are made responsible for diversity in their organizations and evaluated on their progress toward achieving their diversity goals and their ability to manage a diverse group of employees.

This accountability is consistent with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's instructions for implementing Management Directive 715.

Those instructions require that agencies "inform managers and supervisors that success and a positive evaluation will include an assessment of how that manager contributes to the agency's EEO program" since "equality of opportunity is essential to attracting, developing and retaining the most qualified workforce, with such a workforce being essential to ensuring the agency's achievement of its strategic mission."

Yvonne: Succession planning is a comprehensive, ongoing strategic process that provides for forecasting an organization's senior leadership needs; identifying and developing candidates who have the potential to be future leaders; and selecting individuals from among a diverse pool of qualified candidates to meet executive resource needs.

According to the GAO report, leading organizations go beyond a “replacement” approach that focuses on identifying particular individuals as possible successors for specific top-ranking positions.

Instead, they engage in broad, integrated succession planning and management efforts that focus on strengthening both current and future capacity.

As an example of succession planning, the GAO cites the Department of Veterans Affairs’ efforts.

In 2003, VA provided guidance to all of its components in a directive on workforce and succession planning.

That directive requires all VA administrations, staff offices, and boards with 100 or more employees to produce workforce and succession plans and those plans must be aligned with VA’s overall strategic planning, budget, and legislative processes.

In addition, the directive states that the workforce and succession planning process is intended to align VA’s workforce with the critical needs of VA’s mission.

As part of this alignment, the directive requires various assessments, including the current and projected workforce in terms of workforce diversity.

Thomas: Recruitment, the process of attracting a supply of qualified applicants for employment, is the first step toward establishing a diverse workforce.

As the GAO point out in their report, organizations can reach out to diverse pools of talent by widening the selection of schools from which they recruit.

For example, historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, women’s colleges, and schools with international programs.

Organizations may also partner with multicultural professional organizations.

At conferences, organizations can communicate their commitment to diversity to external audiences. In that way, they can build, maintain, and strengthen relationships.

As the GAO points out, the focus of recruitment efforts in the diversity management literature is with colleges and universities.

Given the number of federal employees who are eligible to retire over the next few years, including senior executives, there is also a need for the federal government to recruit mid-career employees.

Yvonne: Involving employees in diversity management initiatives helps to drive those programs throughout the organization.

Examples of employee involvement include diversity councils, affinity or advocacy groups, and labor-management partnership councils.

In addition, mentoring programs are a popular method for organizations to involve senior employees in efforts to develop and retain newer employees.

Another form of employee involvement in diversity efforts is community service.

As an example of employee involvement, the GAO report cites the VA Under Secretary for Health's Diversity Advisory Board.

In 1993, VA Secretary Jesse Brown set forth the direction VA would take to promote diversity, and identified specific practices that would establish VA as the leader among all federal agencies in the pro-active management of diversity.

In 1995, the Under Secretary for Health established a Diversity Advisory Board to address issues affecting diversity in the work place. At that time, the Diversity Advisory Board had three primary objectives: increase awareness and sensitivity about diversity; promote the advancement of underrepresented employees into executive positions; and identify and remove barriers to that advancement.

In January 2008, the Diversity Advisory Board's charter was renewed and its role was greatly expanded.

Thomas: Diversity training can increase awareness and understanding of diversity, and develop concrete skills for increasing communication and productivity.

To increase employee effectiveness in a diverse environment, training should include: teambuilding, communication styles, decision making, and conflict resolution. It's also important that agencies assess the effectiveness of their training efforts.

Diversity News is part of VA's ongoing effort to increase awareness and acceptance of diversity, and promote a flexible and inclusive work environment.

In effect, we provide 15 minutes of diversity training every month.

Yvonne: And that's all we have time for in THIS month's program. We certainly appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity information, sign up for our weekly e-mail news service, NewsLink.

Thomas: Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line. You can also find a current copy on our Web site.

And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, which is also available on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Yvonne: Also, we want to hear from you! If you have story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words DIVERSITY NEWS in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!